

Russia-gate's Totalitarian Style

The New York Times is at it again, reporting unproven allegations about Russia as flat fact, while anyone who questions the Russia-gate groupthink faces ugly attacks, reports Robert Parry.

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It is a basic rule from Journalism 101 that when an allegation is in serious doubt – or hasn't been established as fact – you should convey that uncertainty to your reader by using words like “alleged” or “purportedly.” But The New York Times and pretty much the entire U.S. news media have abandoned that principle in their avid pursuit of Russia-gate.

When Russia is the target of an article, the Times typically casts aside all uncertainty about Russia's guilt, a pattern that we've seen in the Times in earlier sloppy reporting about other “enemy” countries, such as Iraq or Syria, as well Russia's involvement in Ukraine's civil war. Again and again, the Times regurgitates highly tendentious claims by the U.S. government as undeniable truth.

So, despite the lack of publicly provided evidence that the Russian government did “hack” Democratic emails and slip them to WikiLeaks to damage Hillary Clinton and help Donald Trump, the Times continues to treat those allegations as flat fact.

For a while, the Times also repeated the false claim that “all 17 U.S. intelligence agencies” concurred in the Russia-did-it conclusion, a lie that was used to intimidate and silence skeptics of the thinly sourced Russia-gate reports issued by President Obama's intelligence chiefs.

Only after two of those chiefs – Director of National Intelligence James Clapper and CIA Director John Brennan – admitted that the key Jan. 6 report was produced by what [Clapper called “hand-picked” analysts](#) from just three agencies, the Times was forced to run [an embarrassing correction](#) retracting the “17 agencies” canard.

But the Times then switched its phrasing to a claim that Russian guilt was a “consensus” of the U.S. intelligence community, a misleading formulation that still suggests that all 17 agencies were onboard without actually saying so – all the better to fool the Times readers.

The Times seems to have forgotten what one of its own journalists observed immediately after reading the Jan. 6 report. Scott Shane [wrote](#):

“What is missing from the public report is what many Americans most eagerly anticipated: hard evidence to back up the agencies' claims that the Russian government engineered the election attack. ... Instead, the message from the agencies essentially amounts to ‘trust us.’”

However, if that was the calculation of Obama's intelligence chiefs – that proof would not be required – they got that right, since the Times and pretty much every other major U.S. news outlet has chosen to trust, not verify, on Russia-gate.

Dropping the Attribution

In story after story, the Times doesn't even bother to attribute the claims of Russian guilt. That guilt is just presented as flat fact even though the Russian government denies it and WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange says he did not get the emails from Russia or any other government.



CIA seal in lobby of the spy agency's headquarters. (U.S. government photo)

Of course, it is possible the Russian government is lying and that some cut-outs were used to hide from Assange the real source of the emails. But the point is that we don't know the truth and neither does The New York Times – and likely neither does the U.S. government (although it talks boldly about its “high confidence” in the evidence-lite conclusions of those “hand-picked” analysts).

And, the Times continues with this pattern of asserting as certain what is both in dispute and lacking in verifiable evidence. In a front-page Russia-gate [story](#) on Saturday, the Times treats Russian guilt as flat fact again. The online version of the story carried the headline: “Russian Election Hacking Efforts, Wider Than Previously Known, Draw Little Scrutiny.”

The Times' article opens with an alarmist lede about voters in heavily Democratic Durham, North Carolina, encountering problems with computer rolls:

“Susan Greenhalgh, a troubleshooter at a nonpartisan election monitoring group, knew that the company that provided Durham's software, VR Systems, had been penetrated by Russian hackers months before. ‘It felt like tampering, or some kind of cyberattack,’ Ms. Greenhalgh said about the voting troubles in Durham.”

The Times reported that Greenhalgh “knew” this supposed fact because she heard it on “a CNN report.”

If you read deeper into the story, you learn that “local officials blamed human error and software malfunctions — and no clear-cut evidence of digital sabotage has emerged, much less a Russian role in it.” But the Times clearly doesn’t buy that explanation, adding:

“After a presidential campaign scarred by Russian meddling, local, state and federal agencies have conducted little of the type of digital forensic investigation required to assess the impact, if any, on voting in at least 21 states whose election systems were targeted by Russian hackers, according to interviews with nearly two dozen national security and state officials and election technology specialists.”

But was the 2016 campaign really “scarred by Russian meddling”? For instance, the “fake news” hysteria of last fall was actually traced to young entrepreneurs who were exploiting the gullibility of Donald Trump’s supporters to get lots of “clicks” and thus make more ad revenue. The stories didn’t trace back to the Russian government. (Even the Times [discovered](#) that reality although it apparently has since been forgotten.)

‘Undermining’ American Democracy

The [Jan. 6 report](#) by those “hand-picked” analysts from CIA, FBI and the National Security Agency did tack on a seven-page appendix from 2012 that accused Russia’s RT network of seeking to undermine U.S. democracy. But the complaints were bizarre if not laughable, including the charge that RT covered the Occupy Wall Street protests, reported on the dangers of “fracking,” and allowed third-party presidential candidates to state their views after they were excluded from the two-party debate between Republican Mitt Romney and Democrat Barack Obama.

That such silly examples of “undermining” American democracy were even cited in the Jan. 6 report should have been an alarm bell to any professional journalist that the report was a classic case of biased analysis if not outright propaganda. But the report was issued amid the frenzy over the incoming Trump presidency when Democrats – and much of the mainstream media – were enlisting in the #Resistance. The Jan. 6 report was viewed as a crucial weapon to take out Trump, so skepticism was suppressed.

Because of that – and with Trump continuing to alarm many Americans with his erratic temperament and his coy encouragement of white nationalism – the flimsy Russian “hacking” case has firmed up into a not-to-be-questioned groupthink, as the Times story on Saturday makes clear:

“The assaults on the vast back-end election apparatus [i.e. voting rolls] ... have received far less attention than other aspects of the Russian interference, such as the hacking of Democratic emails and spreading of false or damaging information about Mrs. Clinton. Yet the hacking of electoral systems was more extensive than previously disclosed, The New York Times found.”

In other words, even though there has been no solid proof of this “Russian interference” – either the “hacking of Democratic emails” or the “spreading of false or damaging information about Mrs. Clinton” – the Times reports those allegations as flat fact before extending the suspicions into the supposed “hacking of electoral systems” despite the lack of supporting evidence and in the face of counter-explanations from local officials. As far as

the Times is concerned, the problem couldn't be that some volunteer poll worker screwed up the software. No, it must be the dirty work of Russia! Russia! Russia!

The Times asserts that "Russian efforts to compromise American election systems ... include combing through voter databases, scanning for vulnerabilities or seeking to alter data, which have been identified in multiple states." Again, the Times does not apply words like "alleged"; it is just flat fact.

Uncertainty Acknowledged

Yet, oddly, the quote used to back up this key accusation acknowledges how little is actually known. The Times cites Michael Daniel, the cybersecurity coordinator in the Obama White House, as saying:

"We don't know if any of the [computer] problems were an accident, or the random problems you get with computer systems, or whether it was a local hacker, or actual malfeasance by a sovereign nation-state. ... If you really want to know what happened, you'd have to do a lot of forensics, a lot of research and investigation, and you may not find out even then."

Which is exactly the point: as far as we know from the public record, no U.S. government forensics have been done on the Russian "hacking" allegations, period. Regarding the "hack" of the Democratic National Committee's emails, the FBI did not secure the computers for examination but instead relied on [the checkered reputation of a private outfit called CrowdStrike](#), which based much of its conclusion on the fact that Russian lettering and a reference to a famous Russian spy were inserted into the metadata. Why the supposedly crack Russian government hackers would be so sloppy has never been explained. It also could not be excluded that these insertions were done deliberately to incriminate the Russians.

Without skepticism, the Times accepts that there is some secret U.S. government information that should bolster the public's confidence about Russian guilt, but none of that evidence is spelled out, other than ironically to say what the Russians weren't doing.

The Times cited the Jan. 6 report's determination that

"The Russians shied away from measures that might alter the 'tallying' of votes, ... a conclusion drawn from American spying and intercepts of Russian officials' communications and an analysis by the Department of Homeland Security, according to the current and former government officials."

But this seems to be the one U.S. government conclusion that the Times doubts, i.e., a finding of Russian innocence on the question of altering the vote count.

Again accepting as flat fact all the other U.S. government claims about Russia, the Times writes:

"Apart from the Russian influence campaign intended to undermine Mrs. Clinton and other Democratic officials, the impact of the quieter Russian hacking efforts at the state and county level has not been widely studied."

There's, of course, another rule from Journalism 101: that when there is a serious accusation, the accused is afforded a meaningful chance to dispute the allegation, but the Times lengthy article ignores that principle, too. The Russian government and WikiLeaks do not get a shot at knocking down the various allegations and suspicions.

Deep-seated Bias

The reality is that the Times has engaged in a long pattern of anti-Russia prejudice going back a number of years but escalating dramatically since 2013 when prominent neoconservatives began to target Russia as an obstacle to their agendas of "regime change" in Syria and "bomb-bomb-bombing" Iran.

By September 2013, the neocons were targeting Ukraine as what neocon National Endowment for Democracy president Carl Gershman [deemed the "biggest prize" and an important step](#) toward an even bigger prize, neutralizing or ousting Russian President Vladimir Putin.



Nazi symbols on helmets worn by members of Ukraine's Azov battalion. (As filmed by a Norwegian film crew and shown on German TV)

When neocon U.S. officials, such as Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland and Sen. John McCain, encouraged a coup that overthrew Ukraine's elected President Viktor Yanukovich, [the Times served as a cheerleader for the coup-makers](#) even though the violence was spearheaded by neo-Nazis and extreme Ukrainian nationalists.

When ethnic Russians in eastern Ukraine and Crimea resisted the Feb. 22, 2014 coup, the Times collaborated with the State Department in presenting this rejection of an unconstitutional transfer of power as a "Russian invasion."

For instance, on April 21, 2014, the Times led its print editions with an investigative story using photos provided by the coup regime and the State Department to supposedly show that fighters inside Ukraine had previously been photographed inside Russia, except that the two key photographs were both taken inside Ukraine, forcing the Times to run [a half-hearted retraction](#) two days later.

Here is the tortured way the Times treated that embarrassing lapse in its journalistic standards:

"A packet of American briefing materials ... asserts that the photograph was taken in Russia. The same men are also shown in photographs taken in Ukraine. Their appearance in both photographs was presented as evidence of Russian involvement in eastern Ukraine.

"The packet was later provided by American officials to The New York Times, which included that description of the group photograph in an article and caption that was published on Monday. The dispute over the group photograph cast a cloud over one particularly vivid and highly publicized piece of evidence."

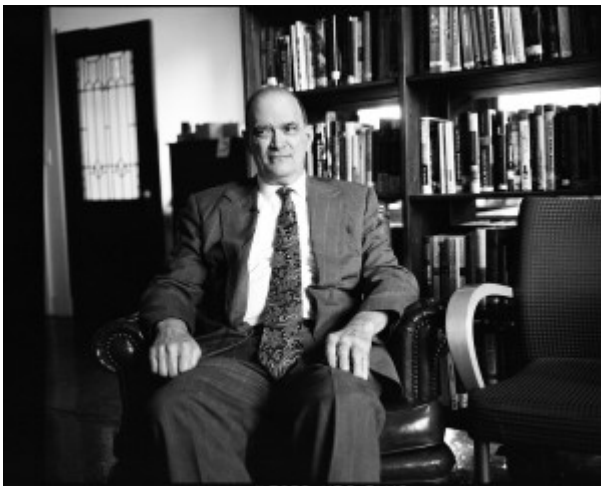
In other words, U.S. officials hand-fed the Times this "scoop" on a Russian "invasion" and

the Times swallowed it whole. But the Times never seems to learn any lessons from its credulous approach to whatever the U.S. government provides. You might have thought that the Times' disgraceful performance in [pushing the Iraq-WMD story in 2002](#) would have given the newspaper pause, but its ideological biases apparently win out every time.

Two Birds, One Stone

In the case of the Russian “hacking” stories, the anti-Russia bias is compounded by an anti-Trump bias, a two-fer that has overwhelmed all notions of journalistic principles not only at the Times but at other mainstream news outlets and many liberal/progressive ones which want desperately to see Trump impeached and view Russia-gate as the pathway to that outcome.

So, while there was almost no skepticism about the Jan. 6 report by those “hand-picked” analysts – even though the report amounts only to a series of “we assess” this and “we assess” that, i.e., their opinions, not facts – there has been a bubbling media campaign to discredit [a July 24 memo](#) by the Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity.



Former National Security Agency official William Binney sitting in the offices of Democracy Now! in New York City. (Photo credit: Jacob Appelbaum)

The memo, signed by 17 members of the group including former NSA technical director for world geopolitical and military analysis William Binney, challenged the technological possibility of Russian hackers extracting data over the Internet at the speed reflected in one of the posted documents.

After The Nation published an article by Patrick Lawrence about the VIPS memo (a story that we [re-posted](#) at Consortiumnews.com), editor Katrina vanden Heuvel came under intense pressure inside the liberal magazine to somehow repudiate its findings and restore the Russia-gate groupthink.

Outside pressure also came from a number of mainstream sources, including Washington Post blogger Eric Wemple, who interviewed [Nation columnist Katha Pollitt](#) about the inside anger over Lawrence's story and its citation by Trump defenders, a development which upset Pollitt:

“These are our friends now? The Washington Times, Breitbart, Seth Rich truthers and Donald Trump Jr.? Give me a break. It’s very upsetting to me. It’s embarrassing.”

However, in old-fashioned journalism, our reporting was intended to inform the American people and indeed the world as fully and fairly as possible. We had no control over how the information would play out in the public domain. If our information was seized upon by one group or another, so be it. It was the truthfulness of the information that was important, not who cited it.

A Strange Attack

But clearly inside The Nation, Pollitt and others were upset that the VIPS memo had undercut the Russia-gate groupthink. So, in response to this pressure, vanden Heuvel solicited an attack on the VIPS memo by several dissident members of VIPS and she topped Lawrence’s article with a lengthy editor’s note.

Strangely, this [solicited attack](#) on the VIPS memo cites as its “first” point that the Jan. 6 intelligence report did not explicitly use the word “hack,” but rather “cyber operation,” adding:

“This could mean via the network, the cloud, computers, remote hacking, or direct data removal.”

That uncertainty about how the emails were extracted supposedly undercut the VIPS argument that the download speeds prohibited the possibility of a “hack,” but this pretense that the phrase “cyber operation” isn’t referring to a “hack” amounts to a disingenuous word game. After all, senior U.S. intelligence officials, including former FBI Director James Comey, have stated under oath and in interviews with major news outlets that they were referring to a “hack.”

These officials also have cited the Crowdstrike analysis of the DNC “hack” as support for their analysis, and Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta has described how he was the victim of a “spear-phishing” scam that allowed his emails to be hacked.

After all these months of articles about the Russian “hack,” it seems a bit late to suddenly pretend no one was referring to a “hack” – only after some seasoned experts concluded that a “hack” was not feasible. Despite the latest attacks, the authors of the VIPS memo, including former NSA technology official Binney, stand by their findings.

However, when the cause is to demonize Russia and/or to unseat Trump, apparently any sleight of hand or McCarthyistic smear is permissible.



Russia scholar Stephen Cohen.

In Post blogger Wemple's [article](#) about The Nation's decision to undercut the VIPS memo, he includes some nasty asides against Russia scholar Stephen Cohen, who happens to be Katrina vanden Heuvel's husband.

In a snide tone, Wemple describes Cohen as providing "The soft-glove treatment of Russian President Vladimir Putin," calling it Cohen's "specialty."

Wemple also repeats the canard about "a consensus finding of the U.S. intelligence community" when we have known for some time that the Jan. 6 report was the work of those "hand-picked" analysts from three agencies, not a National Intelligence Estimate that would reflect the consensus view of all 17 agencies and include dissents.

What is playing out here – both at The New York Times and across the American media landscape – is a totalitarian-style approach toward any challenge to the groupthink on Russia-gate.

Even though the Obama administration's intelligence chiefs presented no public evidence to support their "assessments," anyone who questions their certainty can expect to be smeared and ridiculed. We must all treat unverified opinions as flat fact.

Investigative reporter Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories for The Associated Press and Newsweek in the 1980s. You can buy his latest book, America's Stolen Narrative, either in [print here](#) or as an e-book (from [Amazon](#) and [barnesandnoble.com](#)).

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